A dialogical séance with the void of #socialmedia
Decoding public opinion in American foreign policy toward China

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Abstract

During the shut-down of the US federal government in October 2013 president Obama chose to cancel his trip to the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit. The administration has been scrutinized for its foreign policy 'pivot' toward Asia. This entailed economic and diplomatic engagement as well as a balancing of military power against China. My research examined public opinion toward China, using twitter, in the wake of Obama's decision. It explored two separate spheres: that of elites (members of the press, politicians and academics) as well as the general public (all others). The tweets were searched using geographic functionality and those containing the hashtags #obama and #china were analyzed for tone toward China and then categorized as neutral, negative or positive. The results of the study demonstrate that opinion toward China amongst the general public on this issue were more than 60% negative. Using this research I examine Obama's decision as a foreign input in domestic policy. Negative opinion of China, following the decision, secured domestic support for the Democrats in the 'debt-ceiling' debate.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis: that the elite opinion will be negative toward China (negative responses >50%) and that the opinion of the public in general will be mixed (negative opinion <50%)

Rationale: public opinion data presented by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2013) that general public opinion does not view China as a threat and that of Tan (2011) that elites do view China as a threat

Methodology

Tweets containing the hashtags #obama and #china, from the US, were collected over the course of 6 days (Oct 3rd to 9th) following Obama's announcement to cancel his trip. The tweets were then examined using discourse analysis. Each tweeter was classified based on profile information. Modifiers used to depict China were classified as positive, negative or neutral; and the information was tabulated. Examples of the process are provided below.
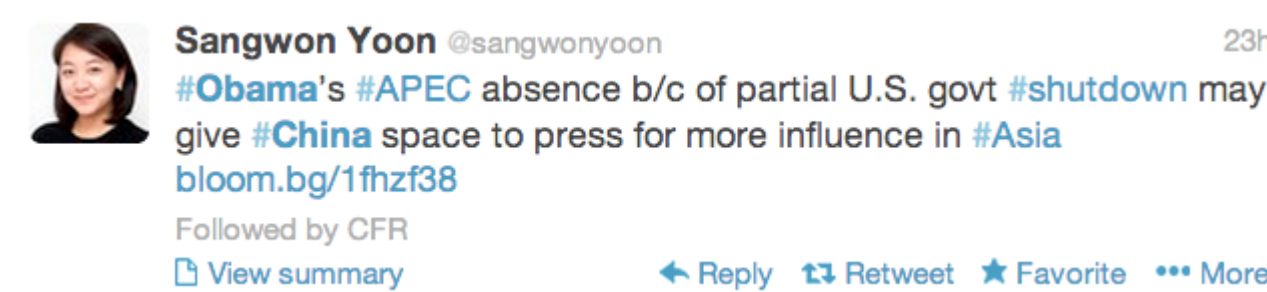

Figure 1 - Opinion from elite (Wall Street Journal Reporter) neutral depiction of China.
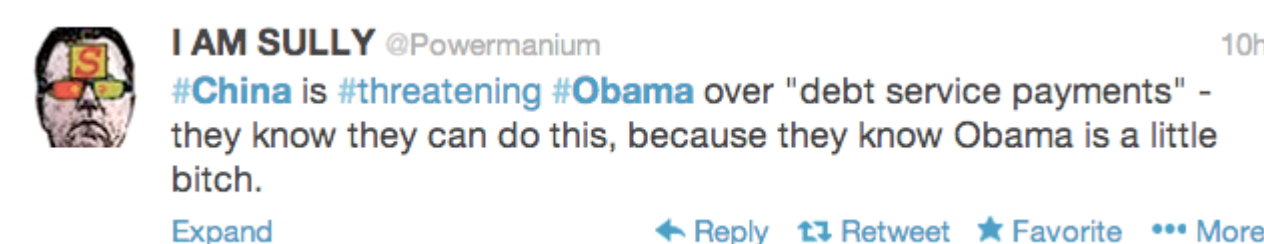

Figure 2 - Opinion from the general public (engineer) negative depiction of China.

Figure 3 - Opinion from the general public (software engineer) negative depiction of China.

Results

Public opinion amongst the general population was found to be negative (>50%) and amongst elites neutral (>50%) toward China on this foreign policy issue.
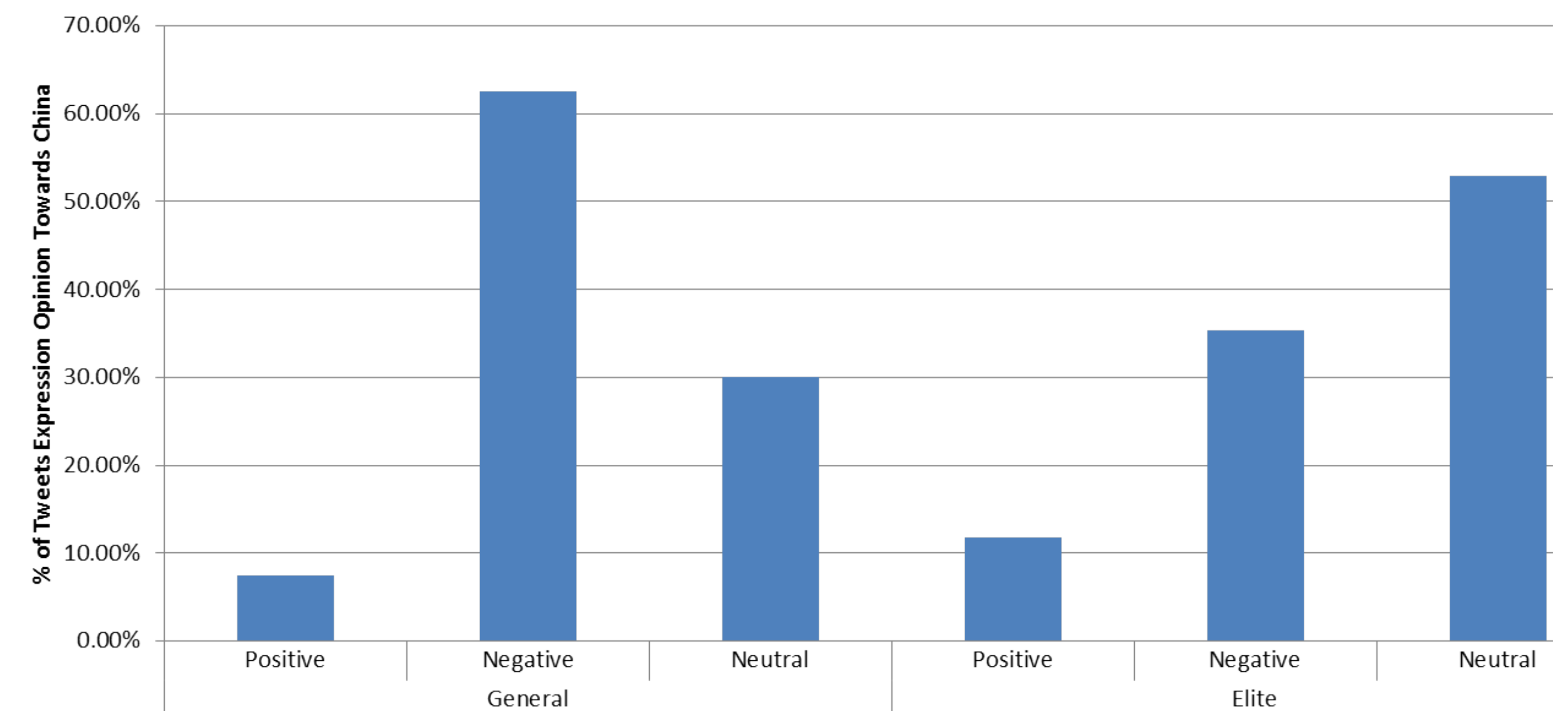

Figure 4 - American Twitter public opinion toward China in wake of Obama's cancelled trip to APEC based on 57 tweets between October 3rd and October 9th.

Conclusion

The Obama administration operationalized negative public opinion toward China to gain traction on the 'debt ceiling' debate between Democrats and Republicans. Obama would have been able to conduct the trip, funding for the executive branch was preserved during the freeze, yet chose not to. In the future the US may be forced to take a more 'China-hawk' and less of a 'panda-hugger' view of Sino-American relations in order to appease the negative sentiment this decision has unleashed. Twitter provides a valuable, time-sensitive, insight into public opinion in foreign policy.